

## SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: KILSYTH REPORT



This report by BEFS Chairman, Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague, is based on a visit to Kilsyth in March 2013 as part of BEFS' Small Towns Initiative.



I am home to just over 10,000 people. I nestle in a valley below green hills. A battle was fought here during the civil war. I have a historic core and a country house estate where your children can play and you can stroll along the paths through the woods. There is a world heritage site nearby. I am an ideal centre for those who enjoy walking through hills and woods. You can moor your narrow boat or hire a barge in the canal basin or just sit, sip a pint and soak up the colourful scene with the hills

as backdrop. Houses are affordable – you'll get two bedrooms for about £80,000 or four-bedroom new build for less than £230,000, and there are plenty of places to rent. You are a 10-minute drive from a mainline railway station. You can reach a wide choice of employment centres in less than 45 minutes on trains, buses or by car. Where am I? Kilsyth, North Lanarkshire.

### **An accessible small town**

Once this was mining country. There are still miners' rows in nearby villages, from which people walked to work in the dirt and the dust underground. Today's journey to work is likely to be a short bus ride to Croy station on the Edinburgh-Falkirk-Glasgow railway line, and from there to an office job. Stirling can also be reached in half an hour. The centrality of Kilsyth within the urbanised Central Belt and its proximity to the station at Croy, and to the motorway network is a major asset. It seems likely to define the development path for the town for the next generation.

All is not perfect however, in terms of accessibility. While the M80, M876 which connect to the M9 are just a few miles away, the roads that connect Kilsyth to these arteries are a reminder of a different age and a different Scotland as they wind past hummocky fields of sheep or through small villages. The last bus back from Glasgow leaves at 11.00pm, the time when some head to the clubs.

The town's topography also poses its own challenges for accessibility. The climb up to the housing areas clinging to the slopes of the Kilysth Hills is steep, leaving some of the elderly population dependent on bus or car connections to the town centre.

### **The historic environment**

There are four key components of the historic environment in Kilsyth. At the heart of the town is a conservation area that has benefitted from recent investment from Historic Scotland's Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme. New paving and attractive metallic street furniture (including silver trees) have given the short main street a facelift. The sandstone frontages on



the street are mainly 19<sup>th</sup> century, and there are a couple of rather elegant shop fronts. However, there is also a gap site and, not surprisingly, some vacancies. There is a neat little Market Square, and narrow wynds and passages give this part of town the authentic feel of a historic Scottish town.



The small but impressive Burngreen Park is an integral part of this historic core. This formal space is set between two small burns, which themselves create visual interest. The park was created in 1910, and upgraded for its centenary. Thus the bandstand is in good condition, with fine ironwork railings. It is used not just for youngsters' informal play, but as the centre-piece of some local events. Splendid ironwork also adorns some of the bridges over the burns. Another cherished feature is

the cast iron drinking fountain. The inscription describes how it was gifted to the Burgh of Kilsyth in 1910 by Provost Murdoch to commemorate his retirement after 25 years' service on the Town Council. The words remind us of a time when local government was truly local, "public service" was a lofty calling, and a small town was a focus for pride and identity. Burngreen Park leads to a wider area of open space, a well-maintained municipal recreational space, with a burn-side footpath.

Kilsyth's second environmental legacy is the Colzium House estate. There is a mansion house and trails as well as a walled garden and even a ruined castle. It also has a famous curling pond (when we visited, the ice still lingered in the early spring sunshine): Kilsyth had the world's first curling club. The estate is a real asset to the town, and must add value to the new houses being built close to it.

The third environmental legacy from the past is Auchinstarry on the Forth and Clyde Canal. Scottish Canals, in conjunction with the private sector and The Waterways Trust Scotland, have created a marina here along with Scotland's first "eco-pub" – drink to save the planet! You can hire barges, canoes, kayaks and mountain bikes here, or walk to the Antonine Wall, one of Scotland's five World Heritage sites. Also nearby is the Dumbreck Marsh nature reserve, on land that was once covered in coal and coke waste.

Finally, when considering the historic environment, Kilsyth was almost a paradigm example of a town built and cared for by the municipal socialism that is part of lowland Scotland's cultural and political heritage. In the late 1950s and 1960s the housing stock was almost entirely public sector. Public build continued into the early 1970s, with most of the stock being in traditional house types. These homes are still the main part of Kilsyth's housing, and although the tenure split has changed, they still impart a sense that this is an egalitarian town, a place where the divide between better off and less well-off is much narrower than in a large city. Some 76% of dwellings are in Council Tax bands A-C, compared to 26% for Scotland as a

whole. Sustaining and enhancing the quality and appeal of this housing will be crucial to the town's future, economically, socially and environmentally.

## **Business and innovation**

The town has a small industrial estate, which mainly houses car repair and related businesses. However, it is also houses Stewart-Buchanan Gauges Ltd. The 4000 square meter plant in Kilsyth is the main production base for this innovative company. Here high-tech' equipment is used to produce products that serve the oil and gas industry amongst others, and which are sold world-wide. It is an important reminder that, in this age of global cities and a service-based economy, Scottish small towns can harbour successful manufacturing companies.

Retailing in the town is dominated by a large Lidl supermarket on the edge of the town centre, and by the local co-op' on the main street. However, the lack of an edge-of-town superstore is not without some blessings. There are two butchers on the main street and a fresh fish shop too. Local shops like these selling fresh, good quality produce enhance the appeal of the town. People travel into Kilsyth to shop at these stores, and the fish shop also sells nationally through e-commerce. Again these are pointers to more general conditions for business success in Scotland's small towns. However, there is some loss of spending to nearby Kirkintilloch and Cumbernauld where supermarkets offer a wider choice and more competitive prices. Car-based shopping in these other towns could become a dividing line in what has been a socially cohesive town.

Scale is important to the business life of small towns, and Kilsyth is no exception. In small towns one business can make a difference – for good or ill – in a way that it does not in a large city. There is talk of three new businesses coming into empty units in the town centre. One will be a music store. Kilsyth has a strong tradition in pipe bands and other bands and music has long been a feature of the education offered at the local secondary school. Hopefully this might be a successful niche business tuned to the unique market opportunities of this particular town.

## **Social life**

No data zones in Kilsyth figure in the worst 15% of Scotland's areas of multiple deprivation and only three are in the most disadvantaged 20%. The local secondary school is attended by around 700 pupils and is within walking distance from the town centre, albeit on a steep hillside, and is a valued local resource. Pupils' performance is similar to the Scottish average – better for boys, but poorer for girls. Nevertheless, and despite its good accessibility, the proportion of 16-24 year olds claiming Job Seekers Allowance at 11.1% is four percentage points above the Scottish average.

There is a good range of active formal organisations for children and youth, with the girl guides, for example, attracting growing numbers. Young people also take an active part in some of the town's community activities such as the Winter Festival and the Civic Week. There is also a boxing club.



However, teenagers still feel the lack of the kind of informal spaces where they can meet friends in the evening and spend time without having to spend much money. Consequently, some of them congregate on the main street, using the seating as a place to “hang out”. Such groups can then create concern for some older residents. There is no cinema and no skate park, although plans for a skate park are being discussed. Nevertheless, discussions with young residents have shown that they are proud of the town and would like to live there once they are grown up. Engaging children and young adults in building the future of the town is an important step for strengthening resilience.

The Community Church and the Community Council are both active in the town. There is a youth group and a young mothers group. One noteworthy initiative is Café Refresh, run by volunteers from the Community Church. As well as operating as a café on the main street, it provides a base for other community outreach activities: Brazilian dancing was a great success.

The Friends of Kelvin Valley Park are active in promoting the wider area as a focus for walking and recreation. A campaign linking them and the Kilsyth and Villages Community Forum saw Kilsyth become an accredited “Walkers are Welcome” town. The Friends group also promote heritage paths through the area. Another voluntary group, the Friends of Burngreen Park, have also worked with the council to lever investment into the park.

Kilsyth retains a good range of public services. A new health centre is planned and there is a general post office. It is the hub for the villages that surround the town.

### **Action needed**

In summary, Kilsyth has been able to make the transition from a town based on mining, other extractive industries and manufacturing to become a town offering relatively affordable family housing within reasonable reach of several significant employment hubs, and with good open space and access to the countryside. Its built environment is key to this transition, and to its future.

A number of issues were identified in a meeting with local leaders that could be addressed, usually without much cost, and which could help sustain the town on its development path. Specifically:

- Work closely with the young people in the town;
- Improve signage from the motorway and within the town, to draw more people into the attractions Kilsyth has to offer;
- Try to get more benefits from Kilsyth’s Walkers are Welcome status by attracting walkers to spend more time and money in the town. The closure of the town’s public toilets makes this more problematic. There is a local historical society: could a way be found for it to use vacant premises in the main street at an affordable rent, so as to create a focus there where people might linger?

- Detail matters: the new surfacing in the main street has already been dug up in parts and re-laid by utility companies. Unless there is care and scrutiny such interventions can easily degrade the quality of the space.
- What know-how might Stewart-Buchanan or the Aberdeen Fish Shop be able to pass on to other local firms to help them innovate and grow their businesses?
- The inability of the Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme to encompass funding for compulsory purchase of sites is a weakness, highlighted by gap sites on the main street.
- Where public funding is used to support private development, care needs to be taken to ensure that there are conditions requiring occupancy of the development. At present there is a key building on the main street (which received a Scottish Government grant from its Town Centre Regeneration Fund) where the extensive ground floor is vacant, with no sign of active marketing, and concerns that the developer may be seeking rents that are unrealistic for this location.

Looking further forward, Kilsyth seems likely to be able to attract more private house building. Conservation of the historic environment of the town and its surrounding assets has played an important part in repositioning the town as a twenty-first century place to live and enjoy leisure. Such action requires skilled professionals and political leadership. Conservation work, local bus services, upkeep of parks and recreation facilities, or educational “extras” like music tuition in the school have played an important part in sustaining the town and the quality of life that it can offer to a population that is not especially affluent by national standards.

These are on-going needs. As local government looks more and more to partnerships with, or even asset transfer to, the voluntary and private sectors, the future of Kilsyth will increasingly depend on the ability of its residents, local traders and housing providers to embrace a sense of their town’s identity and to care for its assets. There is the potential to do that in Kilsyth, but central and local government have an important enabling role to play.

Photos by Cliff Hague